Jesus in the Bible vs. Jesus in the Qur'an: Which is the more Historical?

Applying the latest New Testament research to Islamics

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1. Introduction

There are many points of disagreement between Christianity and Islam, but perhaps one of the most contentious is the person of Jesus Christ. His identity, mission, message, what happened at the end of his life — all are viewed very differently by Christians and Muslims.

The two visions of Jesus — the Jesus of Islam and the Jesus of Christianity — are so different that too often Christians and Muslims end up talking past one another. As Christians, how can we break this impasse? I want to suggest we try and find a neutral common ground and start from there: and I believe that neutral ground is history.

1.1 Aims of this paper

It is my aim in this paper to outline a little of the direction and outcomes of recent New Testament research in the field of the historical Jesus. Historians now have a much better understanding of the first-century context (Second Temple Judaism) in which Jesus lived and ministered and it is interesting to ask the question 'how well does the Jesus of the Gospels fit this picture?' Likewise, one can ask whether the Jesus of the Qur'an fits it equally well, or whether he belongs in some other context. In short, I am proposing an alternative take on an old question: rather than asking 'Is the Jesus of the Gospels or the Jesus of the Qur'an the real Jesus?' we can ask 'given what we know of the first century, which Jesus fits the historical context better?' Rather than comparing X with Y, we can compare each with Z.

2. The journey so far: three quests for the historical Jesus

In the eighteenth century, scholars began to apply historical-critical tools to the Bible, often with a deliberate agenda of debunking Christianity. David Friedrich Strauss' *Das Leben Jesu* said that much of the Gospels were myth. Many others followed this line and dozens of 'lives' of Jesus were produced. This 'First Quest' for the historical Jesus was, however, brought to a crashing halt by Albert Schweizter whose 1906 *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* pointed out that these 'lives' told us more about their authors than about Jesus.

In the 1950s the 'Second Quest' for the historical Jesus commenced. Its primary methodology attempted to separate out what Jesus really did say from what he didn't; its most famous advocates have been the Jesus Seminar. The result tended to be a very un-Jewish demythologised Jesus to whom later Christians attributed miracles and the resurrection.[1]

It was the First and Second Quests that really caused many Christians to throw up their hands in horror, write-off history as a worthwhile category, and concentrate on theology instead. But scholarship, as always moves on. Scholars now talk of the Third Quest for the historical Jesus and it is this that I want to concentrate on this morning. Because the work that is currently been done has, I believe, tremendous potential for outreach among Muslims.

The major hallmark of the Third Quest is that it takes Jesus' Jewishness seriously. It also takes the historical sources seriously and reflects the fact that we know a tremendous

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1 Ben Witherington, *The Jesus Quest* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1995) 12.

amount more about first-century Palestinian Judaism today than was known even 50 years ago. Jesus has to be understandable in his context

3. Reconstructing the first century: available sources

Fuelling the Third Quest is the fact that we a have a wealth of non-Christian sources that enable us to gain some very good ideas of what the cultural context was in which Jesus preached and ministered. Let us briefly outline what sources are available.

3.1 The Old Testament

The Old Testament was the one book with which all first-century Jews were familiar. It was read in various ways and through different grids of interpretation. In particular, it was often read through an eschatological framework, one that looked to what God had done in the past as a sign of what he would do in the future to vindicate his people, Israel.

3.2 The intertestamental literature: apocrypha and pseudepigrapha

The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha are hugely important because they help flesh out our picture of first-century Judaism. They show the different ways in which Jews could wrestle with the issue of covenant loyalty whilst living under pagan oppression. From the stories of the heroes of 1 and 2 Maccabees who overthrew the pagans, to the messianic hopes of the *Psalms of Solomon*, they reveal that whilst first-century Judaism was a diverse entity, Jews of the time were united in their hope for Yahweh to rescue his people from oppression.

3.3 Josephus (b. 37/38AD)

His works are vital for allowing us a historian's-eye-view of first-century Palestine. A Jewish aristocrat who defected to the Romans, his two major works *Antiquities of the Jews* and *The Jewish War* tell us much about non-Christian figures, groups, institutions, customs, geographical areas, politics and even events mentioned in the New Testament. Josephus describes John the Baptist, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, regions of Judea and Galilee, Herod the Great, Agrippa II, the Temple and its destruction and Pilate.[2] It is almost impossible to overstate his importance.

3.4 The Dead Sea Scrolls

Discovered in 1947, the Dead Sea Scrolls are the literary remains of the Essenes, a Jewish sect who lived at Qumran from the second century BC to the first century AD. The many hundreds of manuscripts discovered revealed a detailed picture of life in this desert community: rules for livings, liturgy, hymns, and translations of the OT. They are an important insight into the *kinds* of things that a first-century Jewish sect *could* believe.

3.5 Summary

In summary, then, we have a wealth of data-sources that enable us to reconstruct with a high degree of accuracy the first-century Jewish milieu in which Jesus operated. As well as

[2] S. Mason, 'Josephus: Value for New Testament Study' in C. A. Evans & S. E. Porters, eds., *Dictionary of New Testament Background* (Leicester: IVP, 2000), 596.

these written sources, new socio-historical tools are also drawn upon by Third Quest writers. By reconstructing first-century Galilee as far as possible, even more of the background to Jesus can be drawn into place.

3.6 The socio-historical setting

The success of Alexander the Great's campaigns meant that from the fourth-century BC onwards, the Middle East found itself at the centre of a huge area that spoke one language and was largely culturally unified.[3] The region was largely peaceful, although Rome kept peace by military means and any dissent was ruthless crushed. The religion of the day was paganism and its presence in their own country meant a fierce pressure for Jews to preserve the barriers that marked their cultural distinctiveness — Torah, ritual purity, Temple worship.

Occasionally the region boiled over into revolt. Most famously, the Maccabaean uprising of 166BC against the Seleucids had led to Jewish self-rule for a period (c. 166-63BC). In AD 6 there was another revolt and a third major uprising in AD66-70 led to the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem. In short, the period in which Jesus lived was extremely volatile.

In terms of political leadership, Judea was a Roman province and the Herodian dynasty were client kings, ruling on behalf of Caesar and accountable to him. They were brutal tyrants. Religious leadership, on the other hand, rested in the figure of the High Priest; his role was also political since the High Priest was head of the Sanhedrin, the ruling council of Jews. Most Jew were suspicious of the religious elite and regarded them as collaborators.

The other major Jewish sect of the day were the Pharisees. Their major interest was the revival of the Jewish people and to this end their concern was the holiness of everyday life. They developed a normative body of traditions which went beyond the Mosaic law and they considered these incumbent on everybody.[4]

This, then, was the cultural milieu in which Jesus operated. We will now examine several important aspects of his ministry against this first-century background.

4. Fitting Jesus into his context

4.1 Opposition and opponents

4.1.1 The Pharisees

More than any other group, the Gospel writers record clashes between Jesus and the Pharisees. This fits the first-century context extremely well, for there was no other organised group that Jesus would have clashed with.[5] The Sadducees were an aristocratic group, concerned mainly with politics. The Essenes were a separatist group who had withdrawn into the desert. It was the Pharisees who operated publicly, had an agenda concerned directly with what the Jew-in-the-street was doing, and were widespread enough that Jesus could not have avoided coming into contact with them. The Gospels record a number of high profile clashes all of which concerned that area that most interested the Pharisees: law.

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3 N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London: SPCK, 1996) 152-156.

4 John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew Vol. 3:* (New York: Doubleday, 2001) 330.

5 *Ibid*, 337-339.

4.1.1.1 Sabbath (Mt 12:1-8; Mk 2:23-28; Lk 6:1-5)

Paramount among the concerns of the Pharisees was the issue of boundary markers between Jews and their pagan neighbours; these God-given taboos marked off righteous Israel from the impure pagans and with the tide of Hellenism creeping ever in, these boundary markers took on special significance. One of the most important was the Sabbath. Sabbath-keeping was a symbol of national identity and a primary means of demarcating Jew from Gentile.

A major issue the Pharisees had with Jesus concerned his healing on the Sabbath (e.g. Luke 13:10-17). The pharisaic traditions concerning what one could, or could not do, on the Sabbath were a minefield of legal complexity. Jesus argues on a legal basis, appealing behind the current interpretation of the law to the deeper (and original) meaning. In this case, it is that the meaning of the Sabbath is rest after trouble, redemption after slavery. Israel longed for a Sabbath day when she would be free of her enemies; Jesus declares by his healing actions that this day is here. What more appropriate day for someone to be set free from the bondage of the evil one than on the Sabbath itself?

The dispute fits the first-century context perfectly; especially the manner in which Jesus replied, drawing on the wider framework of Israel's hopes. For Jesus, the issue is not a Sabbath issue so much as an eschatological one.[6]

4.1.1.2 Food laws (Mt 9:9-13; Mk 2:15-17; Lk 5:27-32)

Food laws were another important boundary marker not only between Jew and Gentile, but between righteous Jew and unrighteous. Groups like the Pharisees were extremely particular about who they ate with. When they encountered Jesus' table practice of eating with sinners, prostitutes, collaborating tax-collectors and other undesirables, there was bound to be a clash.

Furthermore, the Pharisees also considered that Jesus was somewhat lax when it came to the matter of ritual cleanliness (Mk. 7:1-7). The whole debate leads up to Jesus' extremely controversial ruling about purity: it is not what goes into a person that makes him unclean but what comes out (v14). Jesus argued that the boundary-markers were now different, that God was redefining Israel around himself and his kingdom proclamation. The Torah could only point to purity, yet the prophets had dreamed of clean hearts (Ezek 36:26). The Pharisees' insistence on purity laws was out of date. Holiness was located in different categories.[7]

Once again, we see how Jesus argument with the Pharisees fits the first-century context, dovetailing neatly with what we know of their legal concerns and with the eschatological hopes that we know were current (if variously interpreted) in the period.

4.2 Potent symbols: Torah and Temple

First-century Judaism contained important national symbols; symbols that identified what it meant to be God's people. Most important of all was Torah, which regulated all of national life. Torah was where Yahweh had revealed his will to his people and covenant faithfulness lay in keeping its statutes. Secondly, there was the Temple, the centre of Jewish worship and cultic practice. It was at the Temple where God's presence dwelt and where

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6 Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 395.

7 Scott McKnight, *A New Vision for Israel: The Teachings of Jesus in National Context*, (Cambridge: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1999) 42-48.

forgiveness could be obtained. Given the centrality to Jewish life of these two great national symbols, it is not surprising that Jesus clashed with his opponents over them.

4.2.1 Torah

4.2.1.1 Symbol and Symbolism

The Torah regulated Temple worship, described the eschatological hopes for Yahweh's rescue of Israel from under the heel of the pagans, and contained instructions for the behaviour that Yahweh expected in order that blessing should be maintained. For those Jews who could not make it to the Temple, studying Torah could confer the same blessings. It was essential badge of Jewish distinctiveness in the first-century.

4.2.1.2 Jesus' attitude to the Torah

At the heart of several of his clashes with the Pharisees was Jesus' attitude to the Torah, an attitude many of them would have considered deeply suspect. This attitude is seen particularly clearly in the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus sets out the practice that is to mark out his followers. Rather than the traditional boundary marker of Torah-keeping, Jesus gives his own instructions, which often go beyond and intensify what was there in Torah.

Once again, law and eschatology come together. The Pharisees believed that ardent Torah keeping was the way to ensure that Yahweh would move in power to restore and rescue his people so that the blessings of Isaiah 40-66 would come to pass. Jesus, on the other hand, believed and said that God's kingdom was beginning to break in within his own ministry. Torah had its place, but the eschatological timetable had moved on. Forgiveness of sins was to be found in following him and his message. Torah's role as the primary boundary marker of those who were truly God's people was over.

The issue of Jesus' attitude to the Torah also ties into the key question of what it was that made Jesus crucifiable? The Babylonian Talmud says this:

> Jesus was hanged on the eve of Passover. The herald went before him for forty days, saying, 'He is going forth to be stoned because he practised sorcery and enticed and led Israel astray. Let everyone knowing his defence come and plead for him.' But nothing was found in his defence, so he was hanged on the eve of the Passover.[8]

Deuteronomy 13 describes the sin of 'leading Israel astray' and the punishment was death. If Jesus was indeed perceived as setting aside and relativising one of the most important national symbols of the day, that of Torah, and replacing it with loyalty to himself, then this is exactly the kind of charge that we would expect. Couple this with Jesus' attitude to the Temple and he looks highly crucifiable.

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8 BSanh. 43a, cf. 107b. Cited in Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 548.

4.2.2 Temple

4.2.2.1 Symbol and Symbolism

The Temple was the focus of Jewish national life.[9] It was the place where the God of Israel dwelt, his *shekinah* glory filling the Holy of Holies. The Temple was the place where heaven and earth met, a sign of Israel's election from among all the nations of the earth as Yahweh's chosen people. The regular system of sacrifices atoned for the sin of the nation and the individual. It dominated Jewish national life,

4.2.2.2 Jesus' attitude to the Temple

Jesus attitude to the Temple was controversial. He taught that Israel's God was present and active in his own ministry in the same way that he normally was in the Temple.

For example, Jesus dispensed forgiveness of sins (Mk 2:1-12). Forgiveness of sins was readily available in first-century Judaism; and the where it was available was at the Temple. If the paralytic had wanted forgiveness, he ought to have gone there and offered the necessary sacrifices. This is what caused outrage among the teachers of the law. Then there is Jesus' practice of table-fellowship with sinners which proclaimed that in his ministry God was welcoming and restoring the unrighteousness. For Jesus to freely dispense forgiveness outside of the Temple system was to sideline this central symbol entirely.

In the pressure-cooker that was first-century Palestine, covenant loyalty was seen to be of paramount importance. The pagans were in power over God's people because Israel had sinned and been rebellious. An itinerant but popular and charismatic kingdom-preacher who advocated loyalty to himself over Temple and Torah would have seemed to many to be religiously dangerous. But it was Jesus' major action with regard to the Temple that moved him from being 'religiously dangerous' to 'politically dangerous'. Before we come to that we need to take a slight detour.

4.3 Messiahship

One of the hallmarks of early Christianity is its universal claim that Jesus was the 'Messiah', the 'Christ'.[10] By the first-century, the idea of some kind of future anointed agent of God was fairly widespread. This hope was expressed differently by various groups: one mainstream view was that the Messiah would be a military leader. There were various messianic movements in the period, most of whose leaders ended up crucified.

What was universally agreed upon wherever messianic beliefs were held, however, was that the Messiah was linked to the liberation of Israel, defeat of the pagans, the end of evil, the return of Yahweh in glory to rule powerfully over his people; in short, the fulfilment of the promises of Isaiah 40-66. The Gentile nations would come streaming to Jerusalem to worship Yahweh in the restored Temple.

It is noteworthy that Jesus was not particularly fond of the term 'Messiah'; his favourite term for himself was 'Son of man'. If Jesus had openly used the title 'Messiah' for himself, the authorities would very quickly have stepped in. Would-be messiahs were a grave political threat and crucifixion was the usual response.

So if Jesus did not openly use the term 'messiah' of himself, what led to his ending up on a Roman cross under a titulus that read 'King of the Jews'? Jesus' action in cleansing the

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9 N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (London: SPCK, 1992) 224.

10 Larry W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2003) 98-101.

Temple was arguably the most messianic of his ministry. He was claiming some form of authority over it and, according to the scriptures which ever Jew knew in this period, the Temple's true ruler was the Davidic king. Kingship and the Temple were bound up together. Furthermore, when Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, in clear and deliberate fulfilment of Zech. 9:9, nobody could question that the Temple cleansing that followed was to be understood messianically. One role of the Messiah in many streams of popular expectation was that he would cleanse or rebuild the Temple. But Jesus went further than that. He was not merely cleansing the Temple, he was pronouncing judgement on it. His actions temporarily caused a symbolic cessation of sacrifices.

In this light, we once again ask 'what made Jesus crucifiable?' A primary answer was his Temple action, preceded by his triumphal entry. The first thing that Caiaphas asked Jesus at his trial related to the Temple-action (Mk 14:56-60). When Jesus made no reply, Caipahas read this the obvious way — messianically — and asked Jesus whether he was the 'Christ'.

What made Jesus crucifiable? The Jewish leaders saw him as a false prophet, not only leading Israel astray but who risked becoming the focus of revolutionary activity. The Romans saw him as another seditious troublemaker and a dangerous political nuisance.

4.4 Summary

In the short time available, we have merely scratched the surface of the kind of approach to the historical Jesus that typifies the Third Quest. But it is enough to show that Jesus superbly fits what we know of first-century Judaism from sources such as Josephus, the Dead Sea Scrolls and the intertestamental literature. The Third Quest has shown that the Jesus of the Gospels fits his first-century context and that interpretation of him needs to take place against this background. But the question is, does the qur'anic Jesus also bear any resemblance to this background?

5. The Jesus of the Qur'an

5.1 A synoptic view of the qur'anic Jesus

The most helpful approach to the Jesus of the Qur'an for our purposes is a synoptic one, building up a composite picture of what the Qur'an says about Jesus in the approximately 90 verses which mention him.

The grandmother of Jesus dedicated Mary before she was born to serve God (3:35) and Mary was accepted for this task despite her being female (3:36). She was overseen by Zachariah who was amazed to find Mary miraculously provisioned with food whenever he visited her (3:37). Around this time, the angels appeared to Mary and announced to her the birth of Jesus (3:42-46; 19:16-19). Mary was very surprised since no man had touched her (3:47a; 19:20). However she was assured that Allah can create whatever he desires (3:47b; 19:21). The angels told Mary about the mission of Jesus: he would be a Messenger to the Children of Israel and given miracles to support his message (3:49).

Eventually the time came for Mary to give birth and she retired to a remote place (19:22), eventually coming to rest under a palm tree (19:23). Tired and distressed, hungry and thirsty, Mary was blessed with water and dates, the provision of which may have been a miracle performed by the infant Jesus (19:24-26). Returning to her people, they were understandably shocked that she had given birth despite having no husband (19:27-28). But the infant Jesus leapt to her defence, miraculously speaking from the cradle to vindicate the charges of unchastity that were being levelled at his mother (19:29-31).

When it comes to the actual ministry of Jesus, there is considerably less information.[11] Two lists in 3:45 and 5:110 refer to his miracles, which consisted of healing lepers, curing the blind, raising the dead, animating clay birds, and soothsaying. There is also the mysterious incident of the table from heaven that Jesus called down at the request of his disciples (5:110-115). His miracles were provided by God[12] to validate his preaching (5:110), a message that consisted of repeating what the previous prophets had said and making lawful some things that had previously been forbidden (3:50).

Despite the continuity of his message with what had gone before (2:87) and the clear miracles that supported it, Jesus faced considerable opposition (5:78). However, God strengthened him with the Spirit (2:253) and Jesus called disciples to help him with his mission (3:52). We are not told the nature of this opposition, only that the plots of his opponents (3:54) climaxed in the attempt by the Jews to crucify him, a fate from which Allah vindicated him (3:55; 4:157-159).

The Qur'an is also concerned with asserting right belief about Jesus. Firstly, his place in the line of prophets is repeatedly stressed. Jesus was a prophet like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Moses before him (2:136; 3:3; 4:163; 42:13).[13] He also predicted the coming of a future messenger who would continue the prophetic line (61:6).[14] His humanity is heavily underlined, the Qur'an being especially concerned with correcting what it perceives as the doctrinal excesses of the Christians concerning him (3:59; 5:72-75). Jesus is not the Son of God, rather he is just a servant of Allah (4:172).

Although the Qur'an is concerned to put Jesus in his place, it also uses some lofty language to describe him. Jesus is the Messiah (4:157), a word (3:45) and a spirit from God (4:171).[15] He and his mother *together* constitute a sign (21:91) for humanity.[16] There are also hints at what may be some kind of eschatological role for Jesus; not only are we told he will rise again (19:33), but Q. 43:61 suggests he is 'a sign for the hour.'[17]

5.2 Overlap between the Gospels and the Qur'an

When we compare the qur'anic picture of Jesus to that of the Gospels, there are a few points of overlap. Both contain birth narratives, both speak of Jesus doing miracles, both record opposition to Jesus and both report that certain groups of people considered him

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11 Most notable among the omissions are perhaps the parables. See the comments in William E. Phipps, *Muhammad and Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1996) 92.

12 Note the 'by his leave' of 3:49.

13 Neal Robinson, *Christ in Islam and Christianity* (London: Macmillan, 199) 136: '[I]n the Qur'an the story of Jesus serves, like all the stories of the other prophets, to authenticate the prophetic ministry of Muhammad and to emphasise the authority of the message of which he is the mediator.'

14 Neal Robinson, 'Jesus' in Jane Dammen McAuliffe, ed., *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān Vol. III* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 17, notes the points of contact between Jesus' ministry and Muhammad's — (i) similar experiences, e.g. sent as a mercy, needed food, had helpers, suspected of sorcery, rejection etc.; (ii) Muhammad inspired in the same way as those who came before, including Jesus (4:163; 42:13); (iii) Jesus foretold Muhammad (61:6).

15 It is in this area more than any other where some have been tempted to build Christian theological edifices; see the warning in Kenneth Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslim* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1999) 33.

16 Kenneth Cragg (*Jesus and the Muslim*, 25) notes that the Qur'an does not connect his miracles with the fact of his being a 'sign'.

17 Some commentators have suggested the *hu* could possibly refer to the Qur'an as the sign for the Hour. But given that the preceding verses have been concerned with Jesus (note the *huwa* of v59 which is clearly Jesus) it seems safer to say that it is Jesus who is the sign of v61.

enough of a threat or an irritant to warrant crucifixion. However, the purpose of this paper is not to compare the Jesus of the Qur'an directly with the Jesus of the Gospels. Rather our methodological approach is to compare both the qur'anic Jesus and the Jesus of the Gospels with the first-century context.

5.3 The Qur'an and the First-Century

We may begin our comparison by focussing on those points of overlap between the portrait of Jesus in the Qur'an and the Gospels.

5.3.1 Birth Narratives

First century Judaism was deeply concerned with the hope that Yahweh would move and vindicate his people Israel; for example the intertestamental literature draws heavily on certain key passages, most notably Isaiah 40-66. We see the same influences at Qumran. It is therefore fascinating to note that the birth narratives in the Gospels, especially in Luke, tap into precisely this hope. For example, Zechariah's Song in Luke 1:67-76 draws on the themes of salvation and vindication of Israel and expresses a hope that through the infant Jesus the promised salvation of Yahweh may dawn. There are echoes of Isaiah in the hymn.[18]

In contrast, the Qur'an never connects Jesus' ministry with these deep-rooted Jewish hopes that were rife in the first-century. Rather he repeats the same message as all of the previous prophets and bears no relation to the particular context in which he ministered.

5.3.2 Opposition

Just as in the Gospels, the Jesus of the Qur'an faces opposition. But whereas the Gospels explain the nature of this opposition and the particular groups it was from, the Qur'an is silent on this. The impression is given that it is the Jews in general who opposed him (Q. 2:87; 3:52; esp. 4:152-159). Whereas the Gospels set out a very plausible first-century answer to what made Jesus crucifiable, the Qur'an does not explain this. Indeed, it is noteworthy that there is no mention of the part that the Romans played.

5.3.3 Miracles

Hope was the driving force of first-century Judaism, it was what kept the Jew in the street going under pagan pressure. The hope that Yahweh would act, probably through some kind of messianic agent, could inspire devotion, praise, prayer and radicalism. We have seen how Isaiah 40-66 was an important agenda for this hope and one particular text from Qumran makes this particularly clear. 4Q521 picks up on Isaiah 61:1-3 and lists some of what the Messiah will do:

> … freeing prisoners, giving sight to the blind, straightening out the twisted … He will heal the badly wounded and will make the dead live, he will proclaim good news to the poor.'[19]

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[18] Raymond Brown sees echoes of the description of the Isaianic Servant of the Lord in Lk 2:71, 79. See *The Birth of the Messiah* (New York: Doubleday, 1999) 385.

[19] 4Q521. Source: F. G. Martínez and E. J. C. Tigchelaar, eds., *The Dead Sea Scrolls Study Edition (Volume 2)* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 1045.

Jesus drew on the same texts, according to Luke 4:18-19 and Matthew 11:1-6. In other words, according to the Gospels, Jesus' miracles were not free-floating acts of power. Rather they were messianic signs, proof that the long-awaited hope of Israel, the kingdom of God, was breaking into history. The miracles that Jesus did and the interpretation put on them fits the context.

In contrast, whilst the Qur'an calls Jesus and Mary a sign, this idea is never connected with his miracles, which remain instead little more than works of power designed to convince people of Jesus' message. There is nothing wrong with this in itself, but it is evidence that the first-century theological context has been lost.

5.3.4 Important absences

It is also revealing to consider what else is missing from the Qur'an. For example, no place names are mentioned — Jesus is not connected with Bethlehem, Jerusalem, Nazareth or Galilee. The politics of the day are not described and key people like Herod Antipas, Herod the Great, Caiapas the High Priest, Pilate and Caesar himself are absent.

The overarching hope of Israel which forms the backdrop to so much of what Jesus did and taught is missing. The Old Testament, the important scriptural source in which every Jewish group sought to root their teaching is not quoted from. There is no Temple spoken of, no festivals and certainly no action in it. Whilst Jesus is called 'the Messiah', there is no understanding of what the term meant or why it was so politically dangerous.

The religious groups with whom Jesus so fiercely competed, the Pharisees and the ruling Sadducees, are also completely absent. Rather 'the Jews' have collapsed into an amorphous, undifferentiated mass. Thus it is difficult to see what made Jesus crucifiable.

5.4 Explaining the shape of the qur'anic Jesus

This complete absence of any first-century context is, on level, hardly surprising. If the traditional accounts of the Qur'an's composition are correct, then it is a seventh-century document. Hundreds of years lie between Jesus and the Qur'an and the context is entirely different. The Qur'an picked up the image of Jesus that was contemporaneous with it, a Jesus who consisted mainly of popular oral stories that drew not only upon the canonical gospels but the apocryphal traditions of the centuries in-between. It responded to its own opponents, the Jews and Christians of the day.

6. Finding a context for the qur'anic Jesus

Muhammad's first biographer, Ibn Ishaq, claims that surah 3 was revealed when a delegation of Christians came to visit Muhammad from Najran.[20] Some traditions report that surah 19 was revealed when a group of Muslims fled Meccan persecution to Abyssinia. In both cases, the stories claim that the Jesus material in the Qur'an relates to polemical attempts to engage with the Christians of the day.

Further clues emerge when we look at some of the stories that the Qur'an draws upon, particularly in its infancy narratives. The accounts of Mary's time in the sanctuary, of her being miraculously fed after the birth of Jesus, and of Jesus making clay birds come alive, had all been told in various apocryphal Christian traditions between the time of the Gospels and the Qur'an. Christians in the past have been quick to accuse the Qur'an of direct literary borrowing from works like *The Protevangelium of James* and *The Arabic Gospel of the*

[20] A. Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2001) 270-277.

Infancy, but this probably overstates the case. What is far more likely is that these stories were floating around orally and the Qur'an drew on this oral pool when it told its story of Jesus.

This is illustrated particularly well when one considers the parents of Jesus.

6.1 Mary from the first to the seventh century

Interest in Mary grew from humble beginnings in the Gospels and apocryphal stories soon began to attach to her. Ideas such as her remaining a virgin through the birth of Jesus and indeed for the rest of her life, her extreme piety and her role as mediatrix developed. Devotion to Mary was particularly fervent in Syria and *The Arabic Gospel of the Infancy*, probably a product of this same area, reflects this very well. One can draw a line from the Mary of the Gospels, through the early centuries and plot how devotion to Mary accumulated.

The Qur'an fits very well on this graph for its time period. Mary is portrayed as particularly pious, 'chosen above all women' (3:42). God purifies her from all uncleanliness. Tremendous emphasis is placed on her chastity and there are strong hints of the idea that she was a virgin forever. In other words, in its presentation of Mary, the mother of Jesus, the Qur'an reflects its own milieu.

6.2 Joseph from the first to the seventh century

The same can be said when it comes to Jesus' adoptive father, Joseph. One can trace a similar graph for him as for Mary, only the slope runs the other way. Whilst he has a small role in the canonical Gospels, it is nevertheless an important one. However, as church tradition increasingly grew to fear and repudiate sex, as Mary was increasingly seen as a paragon of virtue and virginity, Joseph got sidelined. The second-century *Protevangelium of James* introduced the idea that he was an elderly widower who took care of Mary; the 'brothers' of Jesus are thus children from a previous marriage. By the time we get to *The Arabic Gospel of the Infancy*, probably late-fifth century, Joseph has become a bumbling idiot, hardly speaking, and doing little more than causing problems for Jesus to fix.

Again, the Qur'an fits this graph perfectly. Joseph is excised completely and there is no role for him at all. In line with its context, the Qur'an wants to portray Mary as utterly chaste and the virgin birth as a sign beyond doubt. There is no room left for Joseph.

7. Summary

As we approach the end of our journey, let us summarise it has taken us. We have briefly surveyed the path New Testament scholarship has pursued for the past three hundred years when it comes to Jesus, resulting in the so-called 'Third Quest for the Historical Jesus.' That approach seeks to put Jesus in his first-century Jewish context, a context for which we have a large number of primary sources. The Jesus of the Gospels fits that context very well

Conversely, the qur'anic Jesus does not fit the first century. Rather he is the Jesus of polemic, and the target of this polemic looks like seventh-century Syriac Christianity. In other words, if we want to know about what seventh-century Christians in the Hijaz believed, the Qur'an is a perfectly good source document. If we want to know about the first century and the Jewish context in which Jesus operated, the Gospels are infinitely better.

Unlike the traditional way that Christians and Muslims often talk about Jesus, we have not directly compared the 'Jesus of the Gospels' with the 'Jesus of the Qur'an'. Rather we have compared both with the first century background to see which fits. It is arguable that the

Jesus who fits better is much closer to the 'historical Jesus' than the one that does not. And the evidence is clearly in favour of the Jesus of the Gospels.

8. Applying this material

The argument outlined in this paper is novel and draws on two strengths: Christian expertise in Islamic studies and also the rich resources of New Testament scholarship. Christian theology cannot afford to setup watertight compartments between disciplines, rather it needs Islamic studies and New Testament studies to enrich each other.

When it comes to outreach to Muslims and presenting Jesus to them, I am aware that there are two missiological poles. An axis stretches from what one might call the 'Speakers' Corner approach' (which Jay Smith epitomises) to what one might call the 'dialogue' approach which someone like Colin Chapman represents. Here, too, we have sometimes seen watertight compartments. But the two approaches need to learn from each other. Those of us at the polemical 'Speakers' Corner' end may sometimes need to learn what dialogue is and the place for it. Whereas for those who prefer a dialogue approach, there needs to be the willingness to ask our Muslim friends the difficult questions, otherwise we risk being less than honest with them. I believe that the methodology that I have outlined in this paper is highly applicable at both 'Speakers' Corner' and in 'dialogue'.

8.1 Applying this method in a polemical context (the *Speakers' Corner* paradigm)

The methodology that I have outlined is useful in that it simultaneously defends the integrity of the Gospel accounts of Jesus and exposes the qur'anic accounts to serious questioning.

It builds on our strengths as Christians, namely a faith rooted in history and the knowledge of the Gospels that many of us have already. Sometimes the more polemical approach to Islam has given the impression that one requires huge amounts of technical data to hand in order to apply it; this comparative-history method builds heavily on the kind of scriptural knowledge many Christians already have but adds to it an understanding of the first-century which can be picked up fairly easily.

This methodology bypasses the whole debate about the textual integrity of the Bible or the Qur'an and says 'lets start with the texts before us.'

Above all, the method is christocentric. There is sometimes a danger in more polemical approaches that one can win the argument but actually never get around to presenting Jesus. This approach is Jesus-centred from the very beginning.

Using the method in a polemical context is straightforward: one can present the argument much as it has been outlined here, although perhaps in less detail, and show how the qur'anic Jesus is a seventh-century product, completely disengaged from his true first-century context.

8.2 Applying this method in an irenical context (The *dialogue* paradigm)

The 'Stories of the Prophets' genre is a popular one among Muslims. Most Muslims love stories and thus there is scope for talking narratively about the context in which Jesus operated.

As we have said, the method is christocentric. If we are to be authentic in our witness to our Muslim friends, we need to continually bring Jesus into the dialogue.

It is possible to build on aspects of the qur'anic presentation of Jesus as a way into this argument. For example, like the New Testament, the Qur'an calls Jesus 'the Messiah'. One can ask a Muslim: 'what does that title mean?'

One way of using this method in an irenical context would be by asking questions in a dialogue that Muslims cannot answer by means of the Qur'an. For example: 'what groups of Jews opposed Jesus and why?' Whilst asking 'why were Jesus' stories so popular?' would open up an opportunity to talk about the context they fitted. Such open-ended questions can force a Muslim to turn away from the Qur'an to the Gospels in considering the answers. The methodology we have set out can be drawn upon to highlight why the Gospels are a good place to go for the answers.

9. Conclusion

John P. Meier writes that the quest for the Jesus of history is an important check against …

> Against any attempt to reduce faith in Christ to a content-less cipher, a mythic symbol, or a timeless archetype, the quest for the historical Jesus reminds Christians that faith in Christ is not just a vague existential attitude or a way of being in the world. Christian faith is the affirmation of and adherence to a particular person who said and did particular things in a particular time and place in human history. The quest underlines the fact that there is specific content to Christian faith, content connected with specific persons and events in past history.[21]

It forces us to examine Jesus against his background and to try to understand him as his contemporaries did. We cannot leapfrog over history and go straight for christology.. We need to start from history, from the Jesus who fitted his context so well, then seek about recontextualising him.

The argument I have set out this morning enables us to start the process of recontexualisation on the right foot. It helps demonstrate why the Gospels are historical and why the Qur'an is not. The Qur'an can reveal a lot about the interreligious engagements of the seventh-century; it cannot tell Muslims anything about the living, breathing, historical Jesus of Nazareth. For that, we need to get them to the Gospels. I hope the approach I have outlined might help you think through alternative ways of doing just that.

[21] John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew Vol. 1:* (New York: Doubleday, 1991) 199.

10. Recommended reading and useful websites

- **N.T Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus*, London: SPCK, 2000.**

  Many of us grew up using books like Josh McDowell in our apologetics and outreach. But Wright's little volume is equally if not more valuable.

- **Ben Witherington, *The Jesus Quest: The Third Search for the Jew of Nazareth*, Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1995**

  A very good overview of the three quests for the historical Jesus and a study of the kind of results the Third Quest is turning up.

- **Quest for the Lost Jesus website (http://www.geocities.com/questforthelostjesus/)**

  An early attempt at recontextualising this sort of material for Muslims.

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